

THE AMERICAN NEGRO IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

Three Novelists: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin

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IN PICKING up a novel about Negroes one feels almost as if the writer were starting from scratch—as if he were writing about people who have been deprived of culture and of coherent history. It is interesting that although there is much good English literature about India, English writing about Africa is often quite bad. Kipling, Forster, and Orwell wrote of India accepting the fact that the Indians had a culture, even when, like Orwell, they were intent on decrying it. In Africa, on the other hand, while there may have been the Negro race, there was for the European no recognizable culture; there was life, but no intelligible way of life, no immediately perceptible, coherent arrangement of rituals and institutions ordering the lives of its members, only an apparent vacuum of savagery and decay. This "vacuum," to be sure, was what interested the writer, who was therefore

NOVELS about Negro life, STEVEN MARCUS tells us, even when written by Negroes, have too often carried over the stereotype of "darkest Africa," a primitive vacuum without culture and without order. Examining here recent books by three American Negro novelists—Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (Harper), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Random House), and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Knopf)—Mr. Marcus finds in at least two of these writers evidence that, in the search for identity that is so large a preoccupation with the Negro writer, there is a new and deeper understanding of his culture as it has developed in the United States. Mr. Marcus, now working towards his doctorate at Cambridge University, was born in New York City in 1928 and did his undergraduate work at Columbia University. Readers will recall his articles "Terrors of Yoknapatawpha and Fairfield" and "The Highbrow Know-Nothings," in our issues of December 1952 and February 1953 respectively.

more inclined to yield to it than to look for the cultural reality that would have contradicted it; but too often it defeated him. The weaknesses of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and even such less remarkable works as Buchan's *Prester John* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, derive from the inexpressibility of that violent nothingness, which is supposed to be Africa.

With the exception of Mark Twain, this attitude towards Africa was carried over into American literature about Negroes: from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Faulkner, we have a record of the identification of blackness with sub-humanity of one form or another, whether perceived with civilized horror or sentimental identification. And Negro writers have themselves been infected with this attitude.

The error is understandable. After all, the novel itself has a history: it developed with the emergence of the modern consciousness of personality. African culture, with its essential stasis, its meager history, and the narrow possibilities its rituals afford, could hold little interest for the novelist, who is concerned above all with the fate of the complex personality against a complex social background.

But American Negroes are no longer Africans, and the main problem for the serious writer dealing with them is to discover how Negro life in America operates to develop Negro personality. The two best novelists about race, Kipling and Faulkner, conceive of their job in terms of a problem in cultural miscegenation. Kim, for example, although he is white, has been raised as a Hindu, can pass for any kind of Indian, and is himself confused about who and what he is—an ambiguity which allows him to love and benefit from the two cultures which he

straddles. Faulkner, although he encumbers himself with an unsatisfactory theological history about the Civil War, and although he often dehumanizes the Negroes all over again by allowing them only negative virtues ("they endured"), can create characters like Lucas Beauchamp and Joe Christmas, products of actual miscegenation, who are convincing in the dilemma of their identity. In these characters Faulkner resembles Kipling, and comes close to making some statement about the relation between two ways of life; ultimately, however, he does not do this, because to Faulkner also the Negro way of life has no essential organization: he can attribute little to it except passive or negative qualities, and he sees it too much as an unchanging element to play off against the fluidity of white society; Negro life for Faulkner is still "African," without culture.

WITHIN the past year, three novels about Negroes by Negro writers have appeared. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are their first novels; Richard Wright's *The Outsider* is his second. All three are primarily concerned with the city Negro in the North, and all employ devices which are remarkably similar. Like Kipling and Faulkner they treat their subject as a problem in personal identity. And although it would be foolish to suppose that the existence of a Negro culture in America depends on whether or not it produced a literature, it can be said that insofar as these novelists create complex and genuine personalities in their writing, Negro culture in America has found self-consciousness and articulation.

Cross Damon, the hero of *The Outsider*, is a Chicago Negro, unhappily married, menaced by a pregnant mistress, and deeply in debt. Caught in a subway accident, he plants his identification papers on a badly mangled corpse and, having chosen a new personality for himself, devotes the remainder of his life to concealing who he really is. This involves a flight to New York, joining the Communist party, and several murders. In essence, *The Outsider* is really another

Native Son, and Cross Damon another Bigger Thomas, no more. Like *Native Son*, *The Outsider* is full of inconsistencies and contradictions. Most of the book is very boring, with long passages of didactic and quasi-philosophical prose. The jargon of popularized psychology and existentialism washes over the characters without clarifying them:

But, above all, Dot had been to him a representation of a personal hunger which he had projected out of his heart on her, and the two of them—Dot and what she subjectively meant to him—had been something he had not been able to cope with with satisfaction to himself and honor to her. There had been no element of sadism in his love for Dot.

The theme of the book is flight: "... he was fleeing to escape his identity, his old hateful consciousness." Cross Damon runs away from everything—himself, his life, society, thought—everything, that is, except violence. In violence—much as Mr. Wright tries to deny it—he finds his being. The story comes to life only when Cross is meditating or performing some act of violence: "He stepped upon the crushed body, feeling his shoes sinking into the lifeless flesh and seeing blood bubbling from the woman's mouth as his weight bore down on her breast." This impulse toward a moment of supreme destruction and horror is typical of Mr. Wright's vision. Invariably his heroes are swept into the dumb and helpless backwashes of raging violence and sexuality—the conventional Negro hallmark and fate.

ALL through *The Outsider*, Mr. Wright keeps telling us that the least important thing about his hero is that he is a Negro: "For Cross had had no party, no myths, no tradition, no race, no soil, no culture, and no ideas. . . ." He is trying thus to portray modern man in his existential loneliness—

Cross had to discover what was good or evil through his own actions, which were more exacting than the edicts of any God because it was he alone who had to bear the brunt of their consequences with a sense of absoluteness made intolerable by knowing that this life of his was all he had and would ever have.

—but in fact, instead of “universalizing” the Negro, he simply denies the Negro’s experience and reality. It is impossible that a man should have “no race, no soil, no culture, and no ideas.” In his self-conscious effort to turn his hero into a symbol of “modern man,” Mr. Wright has simply reasserted that African “nothingness” which represented the failure of earlier writers to come into living relation with Negro life. Mr. Wright, it turns out, is unable to say anything at all about being a Negro except that to be a Negro is to be incoherent, and to do violence and murder. The point is not that violence and murder are absent from Negro life—I am not suggesting that Mr. Wright should have written a more “positive” novel—but that the figure of Cross Damon is not given enough reality to permit us an insight into these phenomena. Not by presenting a Negro murderer, but by denying in effect that the murderer is a Negro, Mr. Wright has again played into the hands of those who despise his people. Emptying his hero’s life of all content—except that “existential” content which evades reality through the pretense of trying to grapple with it on its “deepest” level—he has left us with only the familiar old black chasm. From the question of identity Cross Damon makes a clean getaway; Mr. Wright leaves American Negro life as undiscovered and inarticulate as if he had never actually participated in it.

RALPH ELLISON’s *Invisible Man* is a basically comic work in the picaresque tradition, influenced especially by the novels of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. The hero of *Invisible Man* just happens to be a Negro, and everything he is and does includes ultimately the experience of all modern men. But this is not accomplished by abstraction; Mr. Ellison has managed to realize the fact of his hero’s being a Negro in exactly the same way as 19th-century novelists realized their characters’ being French or Russian or middle class: by making it the chief fact of their lives, something they take for granted and would not think of denying. Mr. Ellison displays an unapologetic relish for the concrete

richness of Negro living—the tremendous variety of its speech, its music, its food, even its perversities.

Here are three random examples from the many kinds of Negro speech he transcribes:

A preacher at a Negro college:

Picture it, my young friends: The clouds of darkness all over the land, black folk and white folk full of fear and hate, wanting to go forward, but each fearful of the other. . . . All this . . . had been told and retold throughout the land, inspiring a humble but fast-rising people.

A West Indian African Nationalist:

Don’t deny you’self! It took a billion gallons of black blood to make you. Recognize you’self inside and you wan the kings among men! A mahn knows he’s a mahn when he got not’ing, when he’s naked—nobody have to tell him that. You six foot tall, mahn. You young and intelligent. You black and beautiful—don’t let ’em tell you different! You wasn’t them t’ings you be dead, mahn. Dead! I’d have killed you, mahn. Ras the Exhorter raised up his knife and tried to do it, but he could not do it. Why don’t you do it? I ask myself. I will do it now, I say; but somet’ing tell me, “No, No. You might be killing your black king!” And I say, yas, yas! So I accept your humiliating ahction. Ras recognized your black possibilities, mahn.

A Harlem sharpster:

Me? I’m over on the side where some stud done broke in a store and is selling cold beer out the window—Done gone in to business, man; I was drinking me some Budweiser and digging the doings—when here comes the cops up the street, riding like cowboys, man; and when ole Ras-the-what’s-his-name sees ’em he lets out a roar like a lion and rears way back and starts shooting spurs into the hoss’s ass as fast as nickels falling in the subway at going-home time—and gaawddam! that’s when you ought to seen him! Say, gimme a taste, there, fella.

ALTHOUGH this exploitation of his own milieu seems a simple enough thing to expect of a novelist, the measure of Mr. Ellison’s achievement is apparent when we realize that he is the first Negro to have done it convincingly. And, correlatively perhaps, his hero is the only Negro in modern fiction who has no crippling desire to be white. The

precondition of Mr. Ellison's work is the well-assimilated, conscious experience of Negro culture, not as independent or entirely distinct, but as one of the many highly developed sub-cultures that exist in America. The book offers innumerable incidents and observations which demonstrate this; in fact, *Invisible Man* impresses one as being perhaps overcrowded with incident, leaving little room to turn around in. The formless, expansive picaresque novel, however, is just the right thing for a novelist who is in the act of discovering a culture. And in discovering this culture, Mr. Ellison's hero begins to find out about the personality he is seeking.

Where "the outsider" fled from his Negro identity, the "invisible man" rushes toward it and is almost submerged in the plenitude and diversity of Negro life. In a wonderfully comic chapter, the hero, fleeing both from the hooligans of Ras, the African Nationalist, and from the Communists, disguises himself by putting on dark glasses and a hat. He is immediately mistaken by all Harlem for a character named Rinehart, who, it turns out, is an enigma himself, a man of many identities—a racketeer, a reverend, a philanthropist, a great lover. Everyone knows Rinehart, it seems, but nobody knows who he is; and as the hero, the "invisible man," makes this discovery, the comic absurdity of his position dawns on him, and he finds in the possibilities that exist in his Harlem world a richness he had never before supposed:

Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart. . . . His world was possibility and he knew it. . . . The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. . . . You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening. . . .

But if Mr. Ellison has appropriated all the secular culture of Harlem, he has not allowed it to vulgarize him; there are, in his book, no Rochesters or Bill Robinsons, nor, for that matter, Cross Damons, foisted upon us as the real thing. *Invisible Man* is, as far as I

know, the first novel by a Negro to break away from the old, constrictive ideology; in *Ras the Destroyer*, Mr. Ellison has absorbed that myth as part of his drama, while through his comedy he has held it at arm's length where it cannot obscure the clarity of his view.

IF MR. WRIGHT refused to consider the fact of being a Negro, and if Mr. Ellison, by assuming it, did not find it necessary to discuss it, James Baldwin has tried to define precisely what it is like. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* may be the most important novel yet written about the American Negro. *The Outsider* fled from Negro identity, *Invisible Man* toward it; *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is a book in which the characters move between two possible identities—identities which represent the limits to the possibilities of life as imposed by Negro culture. In Mr. Baldwin's novel, Negro culture is a different thing altogether from the vacuum of Mr. Wright's Harlem or the maelstrom of Mr. Ellison's. Mr. Wright has no ideas about the limits of culture, because he has hardly any sense of the concrete; and the main flaw in *Invisible Man*—as is seen in the prologue and epilogue—is that Mr. Ellison is unwilling to discover the specific limits to his ample experience. On the other hand, Mr. Baldwin's awareness of the outrageously narrow range of Negro life, and his insistence on its inflexibility, make the "question" of Negro culture, as we have considered it in relation to Mr. Wright and Mr. Ellison, almost irrelevant. Mr. Baldwin's concern with Negro culture is not so much to deny or discover it, but to present it in its pitifully tragic contradictions. His portrayal of Negro life demonstrates how the myth of African savagery is perpetuated among the Negroes themselves both by the condition of the Negro community in America and by the institution that affords their principal refuge from that savagery, religion.

John Grimes, the young hero of the novel, is an intelligent boy, sensitive to his intellectual abilities and his difference from other Negroes, and has resolved to revolt. "For the

had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's fathers. He would have another life." In Central Park he climbs a hill, and surveys from its eminence the spires of the city downtown—his future dominion:

Before him, then, the slope stretched upward, and above it the brilliant sky, and beyond it, cloudy, and far away, he saw the skyline of New York. He did not know why, but there arose in him an exultation and a sense of power, and he ran up the hill like an engine, or a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him. . . . For it was his; the inhabitants of the city had told him it was his; he had but to run down, crying, and they would take him to their hearts and show him wonders his eyes had never seen.

This, he believes, will be his rich destiny, one that he may possess only if he sheds, like a butterfly shedding its cocoon, the world of his family, their life of fanatic religion, the culture of Harlem, of the Negroes.

BUT his dreams and desires are never to be fulfilled, for that evening at the "tarry service" of the violent Baptist sect of which his father is a deacon, John succumbs to his guilt and to his longings for reconciliation with his family, with his Negro-ness, and with God, and is seized by a religious convulsion. In submitting to it he chooses one of the two fates allowed the Negro. If he were to revolt, as so many in his family had done, the world would strike him down. If, on the other hand, he accepts the literal nothingness of what the world offers, and forfeits his hopes for a better life on earth, he will be accepting the burden of religion and of being a Negro. Suspended over the mouth of Hell, John sees the dreadful future that lies in store for him if he tries to escape what Mr. Baldwin conceives as the modern Negro's fate: the endurance of calamity, the renunciation of earthly pleasure, the acceptance of no fulfillment—the entire negative side of Christianity. John submits to the call of religion, subscribes to the doctrine of the Gospels, and is, as the book closes, reconciled to his condition.

And yet the lives of his parents are ironic and overwhelming evidence that he will find no rest or consummation even in this marginal way. His conversion, bringing in its wake a momentary breathing spell, a community with his family, and a rich, full sense of his being as a Negro, will sooner or later only aggravate his awareness of oppression, of the violent, gratuitous injustice done him by the world—and so will increase the intensity of his religious life, if it does not eventually destroy it. The life he moves toward as a result of his conversion is tyrannically restrictive, but it is the only "safe" one his culture extends. If John Grimes were to choose "sin"—that is, if he were to try to live the life of a normal American—he would not only be condemned by his religion, but would almost certainly be rejected by the larger culture he would be trying to enter and the society whose restrictions on Negro life set up the painful dualism beneath which he and the rest of the author's characters suffer.

There are two "mountains" in this book. When, at the end, John is "saved" and has begun his tortured ascent of the mountain of Holiness, we feel that the injustice of his condition is subsumed for the moment in the larger, impersonal justice of the novel—the strange justice of tragedy. This is his doom, and there is a rightness about it if only because it is inevitable. But we recall that other "mountain," the hill in Central Park from which John, at the beginning of the book, looked down beneath "the brilliant sky, and beyond it, cloudy and far away, he saw the skyline of New York." It is the same kind of elevation from which, I am sure Mr. Baldwin wants us to remember, Eugène de Rastignac, at the close of *Père Goriot*, surveys Paris. It is the prominence from which all the "young men from the provinces" catch their glimpse of the worlds they are to love and win. But for John Grimes there can be no winning; and when we realize this, that he can stand only on the mountain of Holiness, an otherworldly mountain made of bitterness and renunciation, a mountain where he finds his real identity, the poign-

ancy of his earlier vision comes upon us with great force.

EXCEPTION may well be taken to the extremity of Mr. Baldwin's view. There is another kind of adjustment to the world that Negroes can and do make—the sort, for example, that the hero of *Invisible Man* manages. It may be argued, however, that a novel like Mr. Baldwin's, which delineates its characters in terms of tragic extremes, makes clearer and more possible, not to say more urgent, that middle ground of adjustment so conspicuously absent from its own domain. Mr. Baldwin has elsewhere trenchantly declared his antipathy to the kind of "protest novel" which ignores the personality of the Negro; now he has written a novel which is the strongest protest that can be made, because it intelligently faces the complex dilemma of its characters.

What it is like to be a Negro is best comprehended in the stories of the earlier lives of the members of John's family, which give to John's religious upheaval a vitality and significance it otherwise would not have. In all their experience there is one overarching similarity:

There was not, after all, a great difference between the world of the North and that of the South which [they] had fled; there was only this difference: the North promised more. And this similarity: what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other.

The fundamental quality in the lives of these Negroes is frustration; every demand they make on life is rejected. It can be said this is essentially true for all of us, but it is surely many times truer for the Negroes. For us the larger world which limits our fulfillment and cuts down our demands is almost impersonal—it is the world of nature, or of institutions so old and traditional that they seem themselves almost natural—institutions whose sanctions often appear as kindly in protecting us as they are malevolent in denying our desires. But the Negro inhabits a universe that extends at least the

chance of fulfillment to everyone but himself. He must work in the midst of wealth and status, but must live and breed on the margins of society; at the same time he covets the material and social felicities as much as anyone—indeed, more than anyone, for since he has so little direct experience of them, their value is magnified. It is not surprising, then, that the excessiveness of the Negroes' sense of sin, so bound up in their desires for the pleasures of the world, is in direct proportion to their distance from the social, material abundance it contains.

Although *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is meticulously planned, and every episode is organic to the governing conception, it is not primarily a novel of delicate relations, subtle qualifications, and minutely discriminated personalities. There is instead a force above the characters and their relations—adequately realized though they are—which creates an impression of terrible uniformity and strangeness. One of the best things this novel does is to capture all the uniqueness, foreignness, and exoticism of Negro life. Like an anthropologist, Mr. Baldwin shows us these people under the aspect of homogeneity; their individual lives represent their collective fate. Misled by our impulses to atone for the oppression of the Negroes, we have too often denied them a character distinct from our own—that is, we have reversed the myth of Africa. In his intense, narrow vision (a vision not less true because of its limitation), Mr. Baldwin shows the basic separateness of his people without making them depersonalized savages.

MR. BALDWIN's fiction is much like that of another very talented contemporary, Saul Bellow. In his second novel, *The Victim*, Mr. Bellow set out to do something very like what Mr. Baldwin had done—to define just what it is like to be an assimilated American Jew. The main character in *The Victim* is also suspended between two possibilities of existence in very much the same way as Mr. Baldwin's Negroes are—although the Jewish possibilities are differ-

ent from the Negro possibilities. What it is like to be an American Jew today is a precarious thing for a novel to concern itself with, of course, since Jewish culture has undergone a degree of assimilation that the Negro community has hardly begun to approach. Thus, one of the main difficulties in writing about the modern American Jew comes from having to reckon with his "cosmopolitanism." This is not the case for the Negro writer; his people have not had much access to those respectable, functional positions in society through which the Jews long ago began to acquire sophistication and bring their identity into contact with the world outside the ghetto. The chief difficulty for a Negro writer is just the reverse: he must continually salvage from the strangeness and narrowness of his community something to link him to Western man and open up that common ground of culture with the white man which will save him from the final deadliness of his isolation. The point of the parallel between Jew and Negro lies in just this: that where the Jew is becoming more and more anxious to rediscover that by now elusive quality which makes him Jewish, the Negro is becoming more and more anxious to discover his kinship with the white race and with human history—for it is surely true that the Negroes themselves believe, however unwillingly, in their own "savagery." The Jew, it might be said, is hunting for his lost separateness—the Negro, for his unbestowed universality.

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN is not a "religious novel" in any of the ways we have recently come to expect; it is not interested in religious dogma, nor in the disparagement of it. Religion is rather the vehicle of this novel, its means of expression, and not its primary concern. Nevertheless, Mr. Baldwin has given religion that organic function it rarely possesses in the modern novel. The Negroes are perhaps the only people today in whose culture the literalness of Christianity has been preserved, and who can really assert that they are like

the Jews in Egypt or the Christians in Rome. Mr. Baldwin's ability to make the fact of religion relevant and central to the lives of his characters is a testimony to his intelligent use of an existing tradition. Religion in this book is *the* institution of Negro society, and thus—just as is the case with secular Negro life in *Invisible Man*—demands no special treatment or sophistical justification to insure its reality. Yet Mr. Baldwin does not, I think, make the error of claiming more for the religion of these Negroes than it can show—that religion offers coherence to otherwise chaotic lives and permits them to go on living without destroying themselves. It does not cure their ailments, or stop their sinning, or change their personalities; while preserving their hold on life it also kills much of their response to it. There is none of the generosity in their religion characteristic of Christianity at its highest, and it is one of the most disturbing things about this brilliant novel that it extends neither to the characters nor to the reader that generosity characteristic of the best novels—the kind of generosity exemplified, for example, in George Eliot's portrayal of Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*, Dostoevsky's Verhovensky in *The Possessed*, or James's Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove*. The ability of these novelists to force us into sympathy with really wicked characters is a species of detachment still beyond Mr. Baldwin's powers. His treatment of Gabriel, John's father (who is, significantly, not his real father), seems to me to bear traces of mere vindictiveness. This is a very serious flaw, since the working out of a relation between John and his father is central to the main theme of the book—John's discovery of himself.

It must be said also that as the episodes of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* unfold, a rather nasty kind of irony begins to assert itself. Although each event in the novel conveys both a religious import and an awareness that life is being sacrificed for religion's sake, Mr. Baldwin's desire to give both points of view has led him in some places to substitute a poised indecisive-

ness for his usual superb impersonality. Unfortunately, the full compassion that John's fate should elicit sometimes resides merely on the surface of the prose, in formal gestures:

And the dust made him cough and retch; in his turning the center of the whole earth shifted, making of space a sheer void and a mockery of order, and balance, and time. Nothing remained: all was swallowed up in chaos. And: *Is this it?* John's terrified soul inquired—*What is it?*—to no purpose, receiving no answer. Only the ironic voice insisted once more that he rise from that filthy floor if he did not want to become like all the other niggers.

There are two kinds of rhetoric at work in this passage. The first is inflated—"swallowed up in chaos," etc.—and is supposed to convey John's torment. The "ironic voice" of the last sentence, on the other hand, represents Mr. Baldwin's attempt to balance or deflate the extravagance of his hero's religious experience. This is characteristic of almost every passage in the section that deals with the conversion. Clearly, however, neither term is adequately presented, nor are the two impulses they represent reconciled. The clichés in the first part of the passage, and the uneasiness in "filthy" and "nigger," are sufficient evidence for the unsureness of touch which blemishes the last section of the book. The truth is that Mr. Baldwin is not sure of what he wants to say, finally, and he disguises this uncertainty in an affected distance from his material. This indecisiveness, with its compensating impulse toward neatness, seems to me a real fault. It leads to a certain falseness of tone and withholding of commitment—one might almost say of Mr. Baldwin's own identity—that constrict the novel and divest it of moral backbone. This is very much like that faulty irony in Hardy's novels, which eats away at the stature of the characters, forcing them to fit an idea which dominates the novelist's mind; T. S. Eliot's comment on Hardy applies equally to Mr. Baldwin: "He will leave nothing to nature, but will always be giving one last turn of the screw himself."

IN CONSIDERING these three novels and their backgrounds, certain things become apparent.

The Negro remains, for the most part, still locked inside his own world, looking toward the white world outside and longing to be there; and it is his deep hatred of his own condition, even of his own body, that the Negro novelist must deal with. As long as he despises his existence, the Negro will try to escape it; and Mr. Ellison and Mr. Baldwin demonstrate how the Negro's attempt to cut the traces of his personality can be turned to account—a reconciliation beyond Mr. Wright's comprehension. It is the destiny of the Negro to be surrounded by a world which he knows is better and more beautiful than the one he must inhabit; but by constantly doubting his identity, and by manipulating it, he tries to arrive somehow closer to that world outside.

Without a doubt the Negroes in America have a kind of life that is fully capable of producing good literature; it has taken a long time to develop—much longer than most of us, since we are Americans, believed necessary—and no doubt was there long before any of us bothered to think about it. The fact of that life is as much demonstrated by Mr. Wright's disastrous attempt to deny it as it is by its turning out two first-rate writers like Mr. Ellison and Mr. Baldwin, whose novels, in almost complete opposition at all points, are both valid and suggestive in relation to the same problem. These novels show us that today as much as ever a writer of genius and intelligence can master and re-interpret the world around him, and does not invariably need aristocratic courts or ruined abbeys or some impossible kind of society to spoon-feed him into creativity.

And indeed, the failure of Mr. Wright and the success of Mr. Ellison and Mr. Baldwin suggest again that—for the novelist and for ourselves—men are often most human where they are most different, and in their diversity is the key to their ultimate likeness.